

An Easy Roadmap to a Native Garden

by Phyllis Gresham, Chair of the Vegetation Committee, City of Sanibel; Jenny Evans, SCCF Native Landscapes & Garden Center Manager; and Jim Metzler, DDWS Advocacy Committee Co-Chair

This is the second in a two-part series that discusses how using native plants improves the quantity and quality of our water resources. The [first article in the series](#) discussed the impact that exotic plants have on our water resources. This article will provide input on native plants from Sanibel's Vegetation Committee and describe how the [Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation \(SCCF\)](#) makes it easy for you to design and install a native plant garden.

The Role of Sanibel's Vegetation Committee

Protection of Sanibel's native vegetation began in 1973 when two members of SCCF became interested and knowledgeable about native plants and co-authored a book titled [Native Trees and Shrubs for Sanibel-Captiva Landscaping](#). When the city incorporated in 1974, it drafted an ordinance to form the Vegetation Committee based on the Sanibel Comprehensive Land Use Plan and the Sanibel Report.

The duties of the Vegetation Committee, which functions as an advisory committee to the City, include providing advice on sound ecological management of vegetative resources. Members of the Committee are appointed by the City Council and individuals may apply to the City Manager to be considered.

The city has adopted vegetation standards for homeowners and businesses to maintain the island's sanctuary character by protecting its native environment. Vegetation Committee members inspect properties to be developed, redeveloped, and again before a Certificate of Occupancy is given, with a follow-up to the property within six months. It is required that 75% of all vegetation (e.g., trees, shrubs, and groundcovers) on a property be native plants. Properties must be kept clear of the eight specific invasive, exotic plants, including Brazilian Pepper. A list and photos of these exotics may be found on the [city's website](#).

Committee members also respond to permit requests to remove or alter native vegetation, with a follow-up to the permitted response. They assist homeowners in the use of native plants in the landscape and lead bi-monthly walks for the public from October through April on City Hall property.

All landscape contractors hired to work on landscape on Sanibel must have a Vegetation Competency Card. Members of the Vegetation Committee teach the landscaper's course four times a year and conduct the testing.

The committee meets 11 times during the year to address any vegetation issues presented, plan events such as the Invasive Species Program held at the Farmers Market and discuss articles to be written for the local papers. Meetings are open to the public and are also available via audio on the city's website.

Native plants include those species occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impact. In Florida this is considered to be the early 1500's. Native plants provide food and shelter in the many habitats found in Florida. Plants and trees considered native grow in balance with available water, soils, and light conditions, needing little supplemental water, fertilizer, or pesticides. Planting natives prolongs the life of a garden, providing essential habitat for native wildlife, including butterflies, bees, and birds.

Planting of native groundcovers reduces the use of water and fertilizer, both of which are necessary for grasses. They require no weeding or mowing, although they may be cut. Examples of two of these plants are Porterweed and Golden Creeper. The native, spreading Porterweed (*Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*) provides both color and nectar for butterflies. It is low growing, 12"-24" in sun or shade and dry to moist soils and has a violet-blue flower. Golden Creeper, (*Ernodea littoralis*) may be seen on the banks behind City Hall. It has white flowers, followed by yellow drupes. It is evergreen, sun-loving, and spreading.

One of the most spectacular native shrubs is Walters Viburnum (*Viburnum aborvatum*). Spring through summer, it is covered with tiny white flowers amidst dark green foliage. The flowers are followed by red to black berries. It grows in shade or full sun and prefers wet or moist soil.

Coral Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) is a sun loving, twining ornamental vine. Spring through summer, the two-inch tubular red or scarlet flowers are irresistible to hummingbirds. The flowers are followed by red berries that attract other birds.

The Natural Resources Department section of the city's website offers information and photos of native plants, Sanibel's vegetation standards and codes, articles by the Vegetation Committee, the Environmental Reference Handbook prepared by the Vegetation Committee, and other helpful information.

How SCCF Can Help

You don't need to be an expert to start using native plants in your yard, according to SCCF. Staff suggests that visiting nearby native plant gardens is a good starting point for inspiration. One such native plant garden is located on City Hall property, which has lovely landscaping around the building with mature plants and labeled species. In addition, guided native plant tours are offered seasonally. SCCF's Bailey Homestead Preserve at 1300 Periwinkle Way, also has two acres of native plant demonstration gardens themed for the home landscape and our local habitats. At the preserve, staff can answer questions about the plants found in the gardens.

Once you have some ideas for your yard, you can visit the SCCF Native Landscapes & Garden Center which lies within the Bailey Homestead Preserve, to find species to fit your requirements. Staff at the garden center are well-versed in native plants appropriate for our area and can help guide you to the species that are most suitable for your yard. If you prefer to have a little more guidance, SCCF also offers landscaping consultation services, which are free to SCCF members. A staff member will meet with you in your yard and walk around to discuss your goals, identify plants, discuss solutions to problem areas, and make recommendations. For those who want a native landscape but prefer less labor, SCCF also offers design and installation services, from small-scale butterfly gardens to entire native plant habitats.

For more information contact SCCF's Native Landscapes & Garden Center, 1300 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel; 239-472-1932.

Conclusions

While an admirable goal, in most cases it will not be possible to have a residential or commercial landscape that doesn't require any water or fertilizer. By using native plants, however, it is possible to significantly reduce the amount of required water and fertilizer.

Both the city of Sanibel and SCCF greatly simplify the task of choosing and installing native plants. The landscaping that surrounds the Sanibel's City Hall contains a variety of native plants that are labeled. The city's Vegetation Committee assists homeowners in the use of native plants and in season leads walks on City Hall property.

Another place to find native plants is SCCF's Native Landscapes & Garden Center. In addition to displaying native plants that are appropriate in a wide range of settings, SCCF offers three levels of assistance. The staff at the garden center will share their recommendations and insight into the native plants that are most appropriate for you. If you need more assistance, SCCF will visit your site and make detailed recommendations on what native plants would work best on your property. If you want a turnkey approach to a native plant garden, SCCF will work with you to design and install the optimum garden for you,

For a discussion of some of the economic benefits of using native plants, see [here](#).